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XALA (1975): A CLOSE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

Xala (1975), a significant film for African cinema, directed by Ousmane Sembene, is a comedic dramatisation of events following Senegal's (then recent) independence. Sembene focuses two hours of screen time on despising El Hadji, a greedy, corrupt Senegalese businessman involved with unjust negotiations besieging the new government, and his inelegant downfall after being unknowingly cursed with erectile dysfunction by the underprivileged he steps over daily. To retain the status which comes with a Mercedes, three wives and suspect business deals, and to have the 'Xala' (curse of impotence) removed, El Hadji must jump through many hoops while the audience grimaces in secondary embarrassment on his behalf.

Influenced by both French and African filmmaking styles, Sembene weaves a range of significant signs and symbols into the frame to convey key ideas. Visual poetics, unlike dialogue, speak across language barriers and allow Sembene's film to reach a wider audience. Whether the viewer engages with Sembene's semiotics or uses cultural familiarity to understand these key ideas, a similar conclusion can be reached.

Brief summary of chosen scene

Chosen sequence begins approximately 00:20:02 minutes into the film, and ends at 00:20:35.

El Hadji (the main protagonist) and his second wife Oumi, exit her house and make their way out to his white Mercedes, where Awa, his first wife is waiting. Oumi asks El Hadji who will be seated in the back of the car with him. The final shot reveals both wives and El Hadji squashed into the back of the car on their way to the wedding of his third wife.

This sequence occurs very early into the two-hour film, therefore the audience is still being introduced to the film's central themes surrounding postcolonial Senegal (as independence from French rule has only just occurred 'minutes ago') and El Hadji's faulted character. The major turning point of the film, when El Hadji discovers the impotence the Xala has placed upon him, occurs shortly after this sequence.

Although this sequence is short, and consists of only six shots, it is saturated with subtextual meaning.



1.

Analysis of the sequence

This sequence primarily focuses on a triangular relationship between El Hadji and his current two wives on the day of his third wedding. Being what could be characterised as a postcolonial statement film, a common theme throughout includes power struggles and the desire for status. Through Ousmane Sembene's directorial amalgamation of Western film techniques as well as African methods of storytelling, the audience is presented with a piece of cinema that can be analysed across several levels. Effective analysis, however, relies on the audience's understanding of signs and symbols with regards to characters from a potentially 'unfamiliar' cultural setting.



The key signs in this sequence are not simply objects, but characters and their personalities. The first frame consists of Awa, El Hadji's first wife, waiting in the Mercedes for her husband and his second wife Oumi. Awa begins central in the frame, before she shuffles to the right of the back seat. Our eye is firstly drawn to her elaborate and traditional clothing (which will be discussed in more depth later). Her body language is an indexical signifier of her quiet confidence; a hand resting on her cheek, and eyeline towards the action. She has presence, exudes confidence and status – a reflection of her traditional values and upbringing. The shifting of her position in the car is an index which can be interpreted in a multitude of ways.

On a superficial level it may be read that she is seeking a better position to eavesdrop on the conversation between El Hadji and Oumi, as she is positioned to be possibly peeking through the small side window of the back door. However, further reading into the ideologies surrounding an evolving feminist movement and understanding the central thesis of the film, the move is an exertion of status (Ruken Ozturk, 2007).

A quick cutaway to a long shot of El Hadji's white Mercedes is an icon of his personal belief in his superiority to others. The white European car appears to be in pristine condition, despite its dirty surroundings. A bus passing in the background, and a man on a bike, demonstrate how out of place the car seems in a third-world, postcolonial society. The Mercedes is a recurring sign throughout the film; as an icon, demonstrating the wealth of being able to own an expensive, imported car, and also an index, highlighting El Hadji's fetishisation of commodities and desire for status early on (Mulvey, 1996).

The next shot is a medium two shot of El Hadji and Oumi, as Oumi poses the question as to who will be seated in the back with him during the drive to the wedding. Sitting in the back of a chauffeured car demonstrates one's high status, and is a very 'Western' concept. Once Oumi's question is posed to El Hadji, it is much more obvious as to why Awa moved in the previous shot. In Senegalese culture, a man is able to wed many wives, however, the first wife always holds the most status (usually due to it being an arranged marriage to a family with significant lineage). It could seem that



Awa is framed in a negative light, appearing to be jealous and nosy, whereas she may have analysed the situation, and most favourably positioned herself for an enjoyable car ride, with the status of first wife, with her husband.

Oumi and El Hadji begin to walk down to the Mercedes, and we cut to a medium long shot of them passing through a gate. El Hadji moves aside to let Oumi walk through first, however, she shuns this gesture, and pushes him through the gate before her. Although El Hadji is in a dominant position of power in his place of work, he is emasculated to an extent, around his more dominant wives. In many cultures wives preside over the running of the house. In traditional Senegalese culture (with Islamic influence), women do act dominantly in monogamous (and in this case polygamous) relationships, therefore Oumi's behaviour would be classified as the norm. Where the irony lies is that Oumi is portrayed and behaves exaggeratedly as a Westernised woman, who, in turn, still demands to be treated with traditional values, which is confusing for El Hadji. These mixed messages are evident as the couple 'disagree' about who is to walk through the gate first, which would act as moment of humour for African audiences with an understanding of these conflicting gender roles.

The final and most powerful image of the sequence is the three shot of Awa, El Hadji and Oumi packed tightly into the back seat of the Mercedes together. The shot has a humorous quality to it; all three characters are too proud to sit in the front seat, and instead subject themselves to an awkward ride. Similarly to the single shot of Awa at the beginning, the positioning of the three characters, especially by centralising El Hadji, is another indexical signifier of status (Hall, 2007). Denotatively, there is very little space in the car, which is why the characters appear to be squished into the back together. However, it is the connotative meaning which is most significant to the interpretation of the text. El Hadji is trapped between his two wives and their cultures. In relation to blocking, it is very significant to the film's context, how Oumi is draped over El Hadji's shoulder. On a simplified level of interpretation, she is displaying dominant, protective body language over Awa. However, reading further into the social context of the film, this image is a metaphor for El Hadji, and his position of significance in post-Neo-colonial Senegalese society, yet he is still being

influenced by the French. With careful attention to wardrobe dressing and/or minor colour grading in post production, Awa is made to 'pop'.

The viewer's eye is firstly drawn to traditionally adorned Awa, who appears 'out of place' in the frame, similar to the way many native Senegalese citizens would have felt throughout the French colonisation, as their culture was shunned. It is the materialistic and Westernised Oumi (a result of postcolonial influences) whom El Hadji looks most akin to. Throughout the film, he will further betray his own people and become estranged from his cultural heritage as a result of post-independence corruption.

Using standard Western film techniques, such as careful framing, attention to colouring, and blocking in particular, the audience is encouraged think more favourably of Awa over Oumi. The two shot of El Hadji and Oumi frames her as being pushy and demanding, the three shot in the backseat of the car shows Awa feeling confident in herself despite Oumi's attempts to make her to not be so. Such important character traits are captured so simply, almost as if through an observational documentary. This simple nature of the shots in this sequence (such as there being little or no camera movement, and minimal cutting between shots) is common African filmmaking practice. As Boughedir says:

Black African films have taught me to brush away things which are not needed in the cinema and try to get down to a certain undemonstrative essentiality. ... When you keep a camera on the level, it's what's inside that fixed frame that counts: the movements, the space and the framing. (as cited in Barlet, 1996, p. 161)

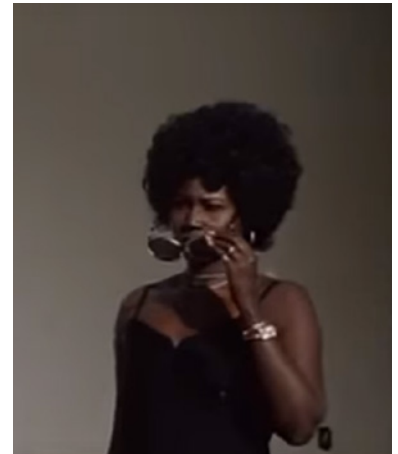
Of the six shots which make up this chosen sequence, each has a distinct purpose. To further enhance the level of depth reached through formal film signification, Sembene has also used multi-dimensional poetic African storytelling techniques when constructing the frame and its contents. Using methods of African storytelling assists with creating more meaningful content for social semiotic interpretation.

Throughout the sequence, the characters' clothing is a significant icon and index. On the surface, the clothes denotatively reflect the values of the characters wearing them: Awa, the first wife, is dressed in traditional formal Islamic attire. This is iconic of her traditional Senegalese roots and connection with her culture. Oumi, the second wife, is dressed in a more revealing 'little black dress' with a wig. Her modern style of dress is reflective of her 'Westernised' and materialistic personality. El Hadji is dressed in a smart black tuxedo. Similarly to Oumi's outfit, the tuxedo is iconic of how El Hadji's perception of Western culture being deemed more 'favourable' is causing him to lose sight of his roots and responsibilities that come with being an indigenous person in a position of power.

Upon deeper examination, connotatively, the garments act as indexes symbolising Senegal's changing power over time. Barlet (1996) suggests:

Symbols do not merely represent, they suggest a meaning and ultimately create a unity, a participation in the play of vital forces which rule the world. (p. 143).

Oumi's dress provides the audience with a great deal of information about her character; she is a Westernised French woman in a Senegalese woman's body. The dress's black colour is a trove for interpretation. Black can be used to symbolise sophistication, sexual temptation, and evil; all attributes which relate to Oumi's character.



Metz discusses how the concept of 'primitive symbolism' is now unfairly deemed to be 'unstable and fragile'. He uses the classic example of how "Good cowboys wore white shirts and bad cowboys black shirts" (as cited in Wollen, 1998, p. 200) in early silent cinema to convey the idea of which characters were good and bad. This method of iconography was later labelled as being too simple and unnecessary, as audiences have become more sophisticated over time (with the assistance from storytelling technologies). Oumi is not a 'good' character, as she encourages El Hadji's materialistic commodity fetishism through demanding money, dominance and affection.



Awa, in stark comparison, proudly sports golden-coloured clothing of cultural significance to 'the people', and is proud of her heritage (unlike her husband and Oumi). She is the image of what is pure and good:

While modernity weakens patriarchy, women represent the perpetuation of that emulation which is the strength of the traditional village. The films willingly pay homage to them, showing them to be tough and hard working. (Barlet, 1996, p. 100)

In a film constructed by an African filmmaker for an African audience, one of Sembene's key messages surrounds the detrimental effects of colonisation on the indigenous people (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010). What is interesting from the perspective of a Western viewer is that Sembene frames 'one of their own' – El Hadji, the corrupt Senegalese businessman – as the enemy, and not the primary source of the conflict being the French. It would be too simple, and subsequently less meaningful, for an African filmmaker to create a piece of cinema which solely points the finger at Western society; that is all too common. Instead, by using a character with a sense of relatability to the audience, Sembene intends to tell the viewer that postcolonial corruption is a two-way street; a risky angle to take.

These specific concepts are significant to the film's successful interpretation, therefore it is essential to have an understanding of the director's influences. Sembene is a director strongly influenced by European filmmakers, and also auteurs from other artistic media, such as Bertold Brecht. The observational style of *Xala* has similarities to Brechtian concepts of audience estrangement and alienation in the theatre, and Sembene recognises that he has been influenced by Brecht's work: "I like Brecht and I'm trying to take inspiration from his example" (as cited in Barlet, 1996, p. 16).

Sembene uses these Western forms of film craft to tell stories of people from his own country (Senegal), by inextricably incorporating traditional African methods of storytelling; *sem-enna-worq* for example:

The film language of *Xala* can be constructed on the model of an African poetic form called 'sem-enna-worq' which literally means 'wax and gold'. The term refers to the lost-wax process in which a goldsmith creates a wax form, casts a clay mould around it, then drains out the wax and pours in the molten gold to form the valued object. ... Wax refers to the most obvious and superficial meaning, whereas the gold embedded in the art work offers the true meaning, which may be inaccessible unless one understands the nuances of folk culture (as cited in Barlet, 1996, p. 161).

While a Western audience may need to use formalised semiotic analysis techniques to try to strip away the wax layers of the potentially unfamiliar cultural setting, African viewers (for whom the film was primarily intended for) are able to access relatable cultural cues, or symbols that are often recurring through a range of artistic media. African storytelling methods are comprised mainly of motifs; visual poetry. As Africa is a large continent, there are a large range of languages, tongues and dialects, even in a single district. For a filmmaker's work to be versatile and reach a large audience, it needs to use a universal language which is easily interpreted by a range of people. Barlet explains:

The intense use of symbols does not, then, lead inevitably to opacity. It is, rather, the opposite which happens when the camera manages to grasp the complexity of the African gaze, that symbolism which both conceals meaning and reveals it, which suggests while occluding, which unveils while adding to the mystery. (Barlet, 1996, p. 158)

Xala, in terms of construct, is a complex piece of cinema. It is comprised of many subtextual layers. The 'gold' woven into the film may not be fully accessible unless one has an understanding of the Senegalese historical and cultural contexts, especially surrounding the time in which it is set. However, African cinema characteristically focuses on using signs to convey important ideas, which speak across language and cultural barriers.

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Author

Georgia Scott holds a Bachelor Degree in Screen Arts. She is currently working on a range of film projects based in Auckland, New Zealand. She has a keen interest in world cinema and documentary forms.

Course notes

This paper was written for Scott Wilson's Contemporary International Cinema course (PASA7301) at Unitec Institute of Technology. The course is designed to enable students to examine local and global perspectives and issues influencing the continuing evolution of media screen production and develop the ability to apply critical judgment to creative decisions. This course employs a noho marae to allow students to evaluate and develop responses to cultural/political perspectives as an emergent creative arts practitioner. This paper was submitted in April 2016.

Notes

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